

Representing Narmada

Krishna Kumar

In the Belly of the River by Amita Baviskar; Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.

AMITA BAVISKAR provides what might well be the most succinct and unreluctantly partisan summary of the Sardar Sarovar Project given by an objective researcher to date: 'The SSP is one of India's many large multi-purpose river valley projects that seek to abrogate the riparian rights of one section of the population in order to provide water or electricity to other people, mainly elites' (p 198). For a book written with conscious sensitivity to words, and not just to problems, this is a remarkable statement of commitment indeed, especially in view of the fact that it leaves the term 'elites' in a state of undefined vagueness. In another place where Baviskar suggests that she has her ear closer to the ground, she disaggregates the term 'elites' and finds a section of them to be among the losers in the SSP game. She claims that the interests of this section, namely the patidars of Nimar, have been downplayed even as another riparian community, that of bhilalas inhabiting the hilly vicinity of the Sardar Sarovar dam, has been 'showcased' by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). As the book proceeds beyond the gentle anthropology of the middle chapters describing bhilala life, it picks up an irascible and wordy tone. This new tone remains somewhat under control in the portion portraying the conscientising efforts of the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS), but gets audibly shrill towards the final sections which describe the politics of the NBA. Though aware and even appreciative of the NBA's pervasive effect on the valley, the book accuses it of lacking integrity. Luckily, there are limits to what can be proved in the course of a doctoral dissertation, even one written for Cornell. The charge against NBA remains unsubstantiated, and the reader is left to wonder whether Baviskar had attempted too much, especially with her ambition to span the vast distance that any student of society should know separates the logic of enquiry from the logic of action.

The specific milieu in which Baviskar gained her insights into the Narmada struggle and the life pattern of the bhilalas is Anjanvara, a village in the submergence zone of SSP. The elaborate portrayal of bhilala life, including its relationship with nature and some aspects of bhilala

epistemology, serves as a somewhat delicate peg on which Baviskar hangs her weightier concern articulated as a hypothesis: "I expected that adivasis acted politically in response to their experience of development - a process which has resulted in the alienation of their natural resource base and their subsequent cultural impoverishment" (p47). At the end of the book, Baviskar says, "If development was the God that failed, it was never an adivasi God" (p 241). I tried hard to find the evidence which might act as a link between these two statements, but I failed. True, the first statement can be interpreted in more ways than one, and it is possible that I got it wrong. In my reading, the clause after the dash states an assumed truth, namely that development has resulted in two things: one, alienation of the adivasis' natural resource base, and two, their cultural impoverishment. The book goes at considerable length into the first consequence, but deals rather skimpily with the second. Maybe this is why the conclusion that development "was never an adivasi God" sounds rather hollow despite its dramatic ring. How do we know that development never created any illusions in the adivasi mind? The only answer Baviskar seems to offer comes in the shape of a rhetorical argument after the second statement quoted above; "People were never enchanted by the myth of development; how could they be when they only experienced its crushing exploitation?" No myth could be worthy of its status as a myth if it did not have the capacity to make people ignore the truth that their own experience teaches them.

Baviskar does not notice this obvious problem in her argument perhaps because her interest in it is purely instrumental. It helps her make the point she wants to make, that tribal resistance to the state in the context of SSP has been appropriated by the NBA because the appropriation has enabled the NBA to pursue its anti-development agenda. Baviskar's critique of the NBA in this matter is harsh and clear: "the assimilation of adivasi struggles into an anti-development agenda neglects history - that people have always fought against outside oppression, on their own terms. Their history of resistance long precedes the history of development" (p 241). But 'neglect of history' is only a theoretical

failure. In Baviskar's judgment, the Narmada movement has done worse. It has 'appropriated' a specific struggle waged by a tribal community in a generalised battle of environmentalism both in a theoretical and a practical sense. In her attempt to prove these serious charges, Baviskar invokes Ranajit Guha's well known essay, 'The Prose of "counterinsurgency"'. In this essay Guha had shown how the local nuances of a peasant rebellion were successively recast into the generalised agendas of colonial domination and later on, the freedom struggle. Each time, the peasant got incorporated as a "contingual element in another history with another agenda" different from his own. In Baviskar's paraphrasing of Guha, the historian of the freedom struggle is replaced by urban scholars of social encounters and environmentalists. They are perceived as rearranging a localised struggle "along an alternative axis of a campaign for sustainability and social justice". The tribal people, whose struggle is thus appropriated, are debarred from becoming "conscious subjects of their own history" (p 239). It is clear that Baviskar would like to repatriate to the tribal people the right to own the image and memory of their struggle. As spectators of this symbolic interaction, I suppose, we have the right to ask what sort of act this proposed repatriation is and what its practical consequences might be. If the locus of this act is the community of scholars, the situation does not change much for the tribal; for if they were excluded from the construction of the Narmada movement, as Baviskar alleges, they are equally excluded from Baviskar's act of repatriation. In this latter attempt, the tribal becomes a means for a scholar to gain moral and methodological superiority over others who stand charged of using the history of tribal and peasant struggles in their own political agendas. Surely, unmaking of a certain kind of knowledge cannot claim any more selflessness than what is being denied in the makers of that knowledge.

Amita Baviskar claims that the hill bhilalas' struggle has elements that the NBA prefers to 'downplay' in its strategy of appropriation. She argues that the 'politics of honour' is an integral part of bhilala society. She portrays a few incidents which show how considerations of a village community's honour motivate the bhilalas to engage in collective action. How this kind of motivation interferes with the adivasi's engagement in resistance to the SSP is not discussed in any detail. This is very disappointing indeed, for such a discussion alone could have proved Baviskar's point about the NBA's manipulation and appropriation of adivasi

resistance. A similar problem arises when Baviskar charges the NBA of "showcasing of the hill adivasis and the simultaneous downplaying of the patidars" (p 228). That the NBA leadership has had two discrete local audiences and orbits of participation in these two riparian communities is hardly the kind of data one needs a prize for picking up. The social geography of the submergence zone of Sardar Sarovar is quite obvious. And Baviskar herself says that despite the sharp class discontinuity featured in this geography, the alliance brought about by the NBA between the hill adivasis and the plains patidars in their resistance to the SSP "has been remarkably successful, with no overt hostility or tension" between the two communities (p 220).

Yet another argument given in support of the appropriation theory is that neither the bhilala adivasis nor the patidars present role-models for the ideology promoted by the NBA as part of its critique of the state's development policies. Baviskar's complaint that the patidars' way of life, especially their newly acquired high-yielding agricultural practices, are inconsistent with the slogan of sustainability raised by the NBA is incredible. If Baviskar finds the NBA's critique of

development purely rhetorical, the rhetoric can surely be criticised with the help of problems inherent in it rather than by citing a community's inability to live up to the ideals which have surfaced in the course of its preparation to face a threat. Baviskar examines the bhilala agricultural and forest-use practices in a similar fashion, and she finds that the adivasi's current way of life is not terribly sustainable either. She herself suggests a reason why this should be so (namely, because of the distortions caused by prolonged state repression and injustice); yet she treats the adivasi's present-day life-style as a basis for judging the environmentalist ideology of the NBA. The entire argument borders on invalidity, especially when one considers the central point in Baviskar's thesis, that both the adivasis and the patidars have been appropriated by an urban middle class environmentalists' movement. If the Narmada Bachao Andolan is neither the adivasi's nor the patidar's own movement, as Baviskar suggests, then why should these communities provide models for the Andolan's ideological stance? But argument apart, I cannot see why anyone should look for model collective behaviour as a condition

for acceptance of sincerity in a protest against an act of aggression. By applying this kind of criterion the book attempts to acquire a further edge to its striking character. Many readers who will not have the leisure to ponder on the numerous contradictions interspersing its attractive style are likely to be struck by its hard message. The reader's plight is likely to be exacerbated on finding several well known names associated with the NBA on the acknowledgement page, without the usual disclaimer that the author alone is responsible for the use made of their help. There can be no doubt that the book inflicts what damage a book can inflict on a popular movement. It leaves one considerably disturbed about the character that the world order necessarily seems to impart to an attempt to construct knowledge about threatened communities and those who dare to fight on their behalf. As a skilled and arguably sensitive researcher Baviskar might well be aware that methodological and stylistic preferences which are part of a trend do not guarantee the interests of scholarship or of people any better than the preferences they replace. We could all do with some more self-doubt, and not just those engaged in the battles of others.

NEW FROM SAGE

FAMILY BUSINESS IN INDIA

SUDIPT DUTTA

Based on a judicious blend of historical data and contemporary developments, Sudipt Dutta provides an absorbing account of the growth of Indian enterprise over the past 100 years and, in particular, during the last decade. Using a multi-disciplinary approach, the author shows that while the Indian way of doing business is superficially similar to the West, in practice Indian business methods are remarkably unique, being based on tradition and age-old values.

1997 • 272 pages • Rs 425 (cloth) • Rs 225 (paper)
A Response Book

This book seeks to steer the business community towards 'greener' industrial practices that are also profitable. The contributors argue that business people have a strong self-interest in minimizing the ecological damage of their activities—without sustainability there will, in effect, be no more profits.

1996 • 209 pages • Rs 195 (paper)
A Response Book

STEERING BUSINESS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

edited by **FRITJOF CAPRA** and **GUNTER PAULI**



SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
Post Box 4215, New Delhi 110 048
(Tel: 6465084, 6444950, 6453915;
Sales Office-6463794, 6463820
Fax: 91-11-6472426)
AE-55, Salt Lake, Calcutta 700 064
(Tel: 3377062) ■ 27, Malabar Road, T Nagar,
Madras 600 017 (Tel: 4345822)